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ABSTRACT

This information brief presents views on quality education from two individuals with disabilities and a parent of a student with a disability. Amanda Dahloff, Kelly Socha, and Amy Pleet, all experienced in the transition process, offer diverse views on how educational systems can best serve students with disabilities. Key recommendations include: (1) create a supportive Individualized Education Program (IEP) team; (2) make buildings accessible to allow students to attend school in their hometown; (3) promote student self-advocacy; (4) plan for the future and include personal goals on the IEP; (5) encourage student participation in extracurricular activities to expand communication skills and leadership abilities; (6) encourage participation in the general education curriculum and experiences; (7) promote high expectations from teachers and parents; (8) ensure students with disabilities have all the same opportunities as other students; (9) connect secondary students with disabilities with adult service supports; (10) inspire students with disabilities with a joy of learning; (11) ensure a positive teacher student relationship; (12) integrate transition and workplace skills into the curriculum; and (13) create a positive working relationship between parents and teachers. (CR)

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What Is Quality Education?
Perspectives from Two Students and a Parent

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET)

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Information Brief
Addressing Trends and Developments in Secondary Education and Transition

What is Quality Education? Perspectives from Two Students and a Parent

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

A partnership of —

Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota

National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education Supports (RRTC) Center for Disability Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

TransCen, Inc., Rockville, Maryland

PACER Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Introduction

The perspectives of students and parents are essential in evaluating the quality and effectiveness of education. This Information Brief presents views on quality education from two individuals with disabilities and a parent of a student with a disability. Amanda Dahloff, Kelly Socha, and Amy Pleet, all experienced in the transition process, offer rich and diverse views on how educational systems can best serve students with disabilities.

A Student's Viewpoint

Amanda Dahloff graduated in May 2002 from Southwest State University (SSU) in Marshall, MN, with degrees in Speech Communication/Radio & Television, and Speech Communication/Public Relations Concentration; and a minor in Marketing. She just finished an internship in news at the local radio station, and currently, she is working as a project manager for the Southwest Marketing Advisory Center at SSU.

My key to success was the ability to aspire, advocate, and act. I graduated from high school in May of 1999, and from college in May of 2002. I earned two separate degrees in speech communication along with a minor in marketing.

When I attended high school, I was the only student in my school with a significant physical disability. I had a supportive Individualized Education Program (IEP) team; however, we were all learning as we went along. Being a minority in the true sense of the word meant that I had to help people understand what I needed and why. When it came time to go from elementary to high school, I faced a serious challenge. The only high school in my community was completely inaccessible. However, I wanted to continue my education in my hometown. As an 11-year-old sixth grader, I wrote a letter to the school board explaining the modifications I needed to make a successful transition to the high school building. I needed an elevator, modified restroom, several ramps, and automatic door openers. The school administration was not immediately receptive to my request. They had concerns about cost, and asked if there were any other options. For my family, no other feasible options existed, so we continued our quest for the modifications. After many discussions, the school granted my request! The letter to the school board was my first exposure to transition-type activities and the first time I advocated for my rights. The event set the tone for the rest of my educational experience. I had gone through the process of setting a goal, advocating for it, and taking the steps needed to get there.

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I was mainstreamed in my classes from the start of my education; much of my IEP focused on the physical accommodations I needed in the school. As I progressed through junior high and high school, my IEP changed. It began to focus more on my life after college and the issues I needed to address. My personal goal was to become independent by graduating from college and living in my own home without assistance. My aspiration was reflected in my IEP. My goals included things like gathering information about colleges, personal care assistance, and adaptive equipment. Obtaining this information gave me a head start in preparing for my future. I not only had basic information and contacts, but I also developed an understanding of how these organizations functioned, and how I could work to obtain their services. I have been able to utilize the contacts numerous times. For instance, vocational rehabilitation has played a role in paying the cost of some college tuition, helping to pay for specialized driving equipment, and providing job placement information.

You have a right to accomplish your own goals. Speak up about what you think is best and why. Often times you will have to say things loudly and more than once! If you believe in your goals and your aspirations, you can convince others to believe as well.

All the information and contacts in the world are useless if they aren't used to reach a goal. I had to invest time and energy to turn my aspirations into realities. If I had let someone else decide what was best for me, my life would have turned out differently. When I began to discuss potential college majors, I received plenty of suggestions. However, I knew I wanted to pursue a career in communications. There was concern that some of my physical limitations would make that difficult, and suggestions that perhaps there were other options. I understood the concern, but I asserted my intention to pursue my degree in spite of the obstacles. I made it known that my desire to pursue this particular degree was stronger than my fear of the barriers.

I discovered I could learn and develop my talents outside the classroom through extracurricular activities. I sought out programs that helped me to expand my oral and written communication skills as well as my leadership abilities. I was involved in the high school speech team, honor society, Future Leaders of America, and Future Farmers of America; I had the opportunity to serve in numerous leadership positions.

Transitioning into high school and later from high school to college and adult life is a daunting task for every student. I am grateful that I had a positive educational experience, and that I began my transitioning process at an early age. The head start was invaluable—it is never too early to begin thinking about the future. If I had the opportunity to give advice to students facing similar challenges, I would tell them: Remember that it is *your* future. You have a right to accomplish your own goals. Speak up about what you think is best and why. Often times you will have to say things loudly and more than once! If you believe in your goals and your aspirations, you can convince others to believe as well. If you aspire to do what is best for you, advocate for what you need, and take action, you can succeed. Your ability to achieve is limited only by the dedication you have to your dream.

A Student's Viewpoint

Kelly Raymond Socha is an Office Systems Specialist with a large medical supply company and serves as Board Secretary for the Spina Bifida Association of Minnesota. Currently, he is preparing to study for his associate's degree in the business field.

What is quality education? As a person with spina bifida who uses a wheelchair, I had many very good experiences in high school. My parents made the decision when I was young that I needed the challenge of a regular classroom, so they did not have me in special education. All my years in school I participated in the general education curriculum and experiences. I did receive some accommodations for testing, and I was allowed to take tests in a separate place when I felt I needed the quiet.

As I reflect on my high school years, the greatest supports were the high expectations that both my parents and teachers had for me. My parents expected me to take challenging classes, work with guidance counselors to develop a career plan, and to get good grades. If I brought home a C or a D, they would make me work harder to get those grades up. Teachers treated me as though I was capable. I remember my marketing teacher who always said, "Don't be afraid to try anything." I don't remember ever feeling really 'pushed' beyond my capability, rather, I just tried harder and strived for what I wanted in life. I did have a counselor one year who kept pushing me toward deskwork, probably because I am in a wheelchair and they thought that that would be the easiest route to go. I wanted to work in the restaurant business and pursued that career. I wanted a challenge; I wanted to see what I could do. I worked at an Old

Country Buffet, beginning as a bus boy and then as the host. Later I was given opportunities as a manager. Those experiences built my confidence and abilities.

Neither my parents nor teachers focused on my disability. I did not have long conversations about how my disability would affect my life goals. I believe that quality education for all youth with disabilities needs to include having the same opportunities as all youth and that the disability is secondary. Teachers and parents can make the accommodations that are needed without losing the primary focus on education.

As I reflect on my high school years, the greatest supports were the high expectations that both my parents and teachers had for me.

My parents also held high expectations at home. I had chores and responsibilities the same as my brother. My own personality was a fighter and risk-taker. I liked taking on a new experience; I was not afraid to take those risks because people were always telling me I could do it!

High school did present some challenges. Socially many of my peers were not comfortable with my disability and didn't know how to involve me in their activities. That made me shy away from people of my own age, but I think my peers probably just needed some knowledge about my disability in order not to be afraid.

Another challenge was posed because I didn't get connected to any adult service supports in high school. Because I was not in special education there was no process to make those connections. I learned about rehabilitation services, social security, and medical insurance from my friends well after graduation. Maybe those connections should be in place for high school students who are *not* on an IEP .

The advice I would give to parents and teachers about providing quality education is to first, treat kids with disabilities no different than anybody else. Kids get scared to try things when parents focus on the disability and don't encourage them to take the risks. The curriculum is important in high school in order to learn new skills and develop career options, but I think the attitude that teachers and parents have toward the disability is more important. I made mistakes along the way. I needed my parents to bail me out a few times. I pulled back and started over in career and relationships. But I never gave up, and I felt lucky to learn from those experiences. The positive relationships between kids and their teachers, and between parents and their kids, help the kids believe they can do anything no matter what happens.

A Parent's Viewpoint

Amy M. Pleet, Ed.D., is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Towson University in Maryland. She has been an English teacher, special educator, and department chair. She has two children, one of whom has special needs.

What is quality education? How would I answer the question as a parent? I want my middle school daughter to be prepared to think. I want her teachers to inspire her to go beyond her concerns about popularity and "being cool" to develop an excitement and joy about learning. I want her to be so turned on to school projects that she forgets herself and can't wait to work on them. I want her to develop a work ethic that will empower her to complete tasks even when she doesn't feel like it. I want her to have a foundation of knowledge in a wide range of topics so that she will be able to converse with people of all backgrounds wherever she encounters them. I want her to be able to find information to address high school and college projects. Do I want her to meet the state learning standards? Of course, but only if that can be achieved within the context of human accomplishment. I hope her teachers are not so pressured to improve their scores that they forget they are teaching real live teenagers. It is the relationships she has with those teachers that will make the biggest difference. The teachers who care about her, the teachers who seek her out as an individual and treat her with respect, are the ones she talks about at night. They're the ones she will push herself to impress. She'll say, "I want to get full bonus points for typing my homework in Mr. B's class." But she'll also say, "My substitute doesn't know anything about algebra, so there's no point in doing my homework. He won't check it anyway." I want her to have the best teachers.

(My daughter) will say, "I want to get full bonus points for typing my homework in Mr. B's class." But she'll also say, "My substitute doesn't know anything about algebra, so there's no point in doing my homework. He won't check it anyway." I want her to have the best teachers.

My son with special needs recently graduated from high school. Has he had a quality education? Again, I

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A Parent's Viewpoint, Continued

reflect on the teachers who reached out to relate to him. He needed accommodations and special services; he needed the stimulation of challenging academic course work, but he only benefited from these things in classes where he bonded with the teacher and was accepted by his classmates. When he was regarded with respect, he impressed us all with his accomplishments.

In my own role as a teacher, transition specialist, and professor, I believe in the value of implementing standards. I believe that all students, including those with disabilities, will benefit from access to the general curriculum. I know that there were many students, prior to the requirements of IDEA 1997, who were never given a chance with challenging curriculum. Many have surprised us all with their success with the re-engineered instructional strategies. I have advocated for integrating transition and workplace skills through strategies like Blended Instruction. Most importantly, I know that none of this will happen without strong teacher preparation programs.

As a parent I know that teachers can't do it all alone. I have offered myself in partnership to the teachers. Some welcome my input, my worth as another adult who knows my children's history. Other teachers do not want to engage in this way; they believe it's their professional responsibility to handle it themselves. I understand. In my early years as a teacher, I was the same way. In the education courses I teach now, I challenge preservice and graduate teachers to "live" in the parent role so that they will be more open to hearing the concerns and pleas of parents.

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